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ABSTRACT

Sometimes an assessment program becomes well-established, nationally recognized, "proven" effective, and thus stuck in its routines and reasoning, becoming just another university bureaucracy for the teachers and students who work within it. The pedagogical question was how to keep an assessment program, or writing program for that matter, viable and productive. Teachers found themselves steeped in an assessment system which they had no say in creating; they did not feel a part of the portfolio system. Seeking to remake a system and claim it as theirs, educators at the State University of New York at Stony Brook came together to author change. Process, collaboration learning, and audience awareness are not just for the writing classroom, they are for the writing program. A group of four operates with these practices in mind. Meeting once a week, visiting each other's classrooms and students, and reading student papers together, teachers seek to learn from their differences in teaching and evaluating. The approach to a portfolio system would be a model for how best not only to run writing programs but to think about writing, teaching writing, organizing writing programs and writing in the academic community and curriculum and beyond. (CR)

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Assessing Assessment: Reinventing the Portfolio System, Reinvigorating A Writing Program

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Assessing Assessment: Reinventing the Portfolio System,
Reinvigorating A Writing Program

What happens when an assessment program becomes well-established, nationally recognized, "proven" effective and thus stuck in its routines and reasoning, becoming just another university bureaucracy for the teachers and students who with work within it?

The question comes to you as an invitation to think about a larger theoretical and pedagogical question about how to keep an assessment program, or writing program for that matter, viable and productive. But that is not how it came to me, or any of the other teachers represented in this panel when we suddenly found ourselves steeped in a assessment system that we had no say creating.

The issue was, at first, simply personal--we did not feel apart of the portfolio system.. Long before, and without us Stony Brook, a pioneer in its day, had set the guidelines for the system: we receive 25 portfolios from students in other classes, take them home, pass or "no pass" them, and since the policy is to keep the process anonymous, we return them to the person in charge who then gives them back to their rightful owners. If we do not like the results, we need one teacher to change them. That was usually ourselves. A foolproof procedure.

Which was exactly the problem. Like my freshman students who often write as if their words were separate from them, disembodied,

alienated, we felt like what was once charged with sound philosophy and student-centered pedagogy came to us as a system of anonymous procedures, planned assignments and at the end of the term when it came down to reading those students portfolios, we realized we did not want to sign our name to someone else's work. When our director encouraged us to come together on these issues, we found that if we voiced our question loud enough, we heard echoes. There was a community of teachers who were ready to remake a system and claim it ours for our time, our assessment goals as they were and are in the process of becoming.

With our directors and other teachers, we could articulate and understand our personal frustrations within a larger historical and pedagogical framework. There was energy in this meeting, we were coming together as a community to author change. It occurred to us that we ought to continue the conversation with other teachers, bring it into the classroom and keep it going all year long.

Which is what we are doing now. We have left the large group and now work in a group of four, having chosen each other because we all believe in constantly asking various versions of that question: how do we keep our evaluations fair, rigorous, and related to what and how we teach writing? We have come to believe that anonymous grading is like writing without an audience or editor. Process, collaborative learning, and audience awareness are not just for the writing classroom, they are for the writing program. Our group operates with these pedagogical practices in mind and in the daily matter of

evaluation. We meet once a week, visit each other's classes and students, and read our student papers together because we do not teach, or evaluate the same way and we want to know why and what we can learn from our differences.

So that original question had bred, as have the teachers who are now operating in small portfolio groups: half the writing program. And now we bring this question to the profession as a whole, in the hopes to expand our experiment into program wide changes in assessment and in writing program systems. Today innovations in the writing world tend to be systematically organized--systematic in that one way of organizing writing programs becomes a template to drop and fill with another as the tide of the profession goes (from process to product, product to cultural studies). The approach to a portfolio system as discussed above would be a model for how best not only to run Writing Programs, but to think about writing, teaching writing, organizing writing programs and writing in the academic community and curriculum and beyond.

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